

THE PRINCE OF GRAUSTARK

By
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Author of "Graustark,"
"Beverly of Graustark," Etc.

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CHAPTER XV. Three Messages.

AS Robin approached the Rita a tall young man emerged from the entrance, stared at him for an instant and then swung off at a rapid pace in the direction of the Rue de la Paix. He was the good looking young fellow who had met her at the steamship landing, and it was quite obvious that he had been making investigations on his own account.

Robin permitted himself a sly grin as he sauntered into the hotel. He had given that fellow something to worry about, if he had accomplished nothing else. Then he found himself wondering if by any chance it could be the Scoville fellow. That would be a facer!

He found Quinnox and Dank awaiting him in the lobby. They were visibly excited.

"Did you observe the fellow who just went out?" inquired Robin, assuming a most casual manner.

"Yes," said both men in unison.

"I think we've got some interesting news concerning that very chap," added the count, glancing around uneasily.

"Perhaps I may be able to anticipate it, count," ventured Robin. "I've an idea he is young Scoville, the chap who is supposed to be in love with Miss Blithers—and vice versa," he concluded, with a chuckle.

"What have you heard?" demanded the count in astonishment.

"Let's sit down," said Robin, at once convinced that he had stumbled upon an unwelcome truth.

Quinnox gravely extracted two or three bits of paper from his pocket and spread them out in order before his sovereign.

"Read this one first," said he grimly.

It was a cablegram from their financial agents in New York city, and it said:

Mr. B. making a hurried trip to Paris just learned Scoville preceded Miss B. to Europe by fast steamer and has been seen with her in Paris. B. fears an elopement. Make sure papers are signed at once, as such contingency might cause B. to change his mind and withdraw if possible.

Robin looked up. "I think this may account for the two manhunters," said he. His companions stared. "You will hear all about them from Gourou. We were followed this afternoon."

"Followed?" gasped Quinnox. "Beautifully," said the prince, with his brightest smile. "Detectives, you know. It was ripping."

"I had the feeling that evil would be the result of this foolish trip to-day," groaned Quinnox. "I should not have permitted you to—"

"The result is still in doubt," said Robin enigmatically. "And now, what comes next?"

"Read this one. It is from Mr. Blithers. I'll guarantee that you do not take this one so complacently."

He was right in his surmise. Robin ran his eye swiftly over the cablegram and then started up from his chair with a muttered imprecation.

"Sh!" cautioned the count—and just in time, for the young man was on the point of enlarging upon his original effort. "Calm yourself, Bobby, my lad."

"You needn't caution me," murmured the prince. "If I had the tongue of a pirate I couldn't begin to do justice to this," and he slapped his hand resoundingly upon the crumpled message from William W. Blithers.

The message had been sent by Mr. Blithers that morning, evidently just before the sailing of the fast French steamer on which he and his wife were crossing to Havre. It was directed to August Totten and read as follows:

Tell our young friend to qualify statement to press at once. Anecdote recognition of busy dentist and admit engagement. This is imperative. I am not in mood for trifling. Have wired Paris papers that engagement is settled. Have also wired daughter. The sooner we get together on this the better. Wait for my arrival in Paris. W. B.

"There is still another delectable communication for you, Robin," said the count. It was directed to R. Schmidt, and it took the liberty of opening it, as authorized. Read it!"

This was one of the ordinary "petits bleus," dropped into the pneumatic tube letter box at 2:30 that afternoon, shortly before Robin ventured forth on his interesting expedition in quest of tea, and its contents were very crisp and to the point:

Pay no attention to any word you may have received from my father. He makes a ridiculous comment to one which I shall ignore. If you have received a similar message I implore you to disregard it altogether. Let's give each other a chance. MAUD BLITHERS.

Mr. Blithers received a cablegram from the Jupiter when the ship was three days out from New York. It was terse, but sufficient.

Have just had a glimpse of Prince Charming. He is very good looking. Love to mother. MAUD.

He had barely settled into a state of complete satisfaction with himself over the successful inauguration of a shrewd campaign to get the better of the recalcitrant Maud and the incomprehensible Robin when he was thrown into a panic by the discovery that young Chandler Scoville had sailed for Europe two days ahead of Maud and her elderly companion.

Newspaper reporters in New York camped on the trail of Mr. Blithers. He very obligingly admitted that there was something in the report that his daughter was to marry the Prince of Graustark, although he couldn't say anything definite at the time. It wouldn't be fair to the parties concerned, he explained. Then came the disgusting denials in Paris by his daughter and the ungrateful prince. This was too much. He wouldn't understand such unflinching behaviour on the part of one, and he certainly couldn't forgive the ingratitude of the other.

Instead of waiting until Saturday to sail, he changed ships and left New York on Friday, thereby gaining nothing by the move except relief from the newspapers, for it appears that he gave up a five day boat for one that could not do it under six.

"There will be something doing in Europe the day I land there, Lou," he said to his wife as they stood on deck and watched the statue of Liberty glide swiftly back toward Manhattan Island. "I've got all the strings working smoothly. We've got Groostock where it can't peep any louder than a freshly hatched chicken, and we'll soon bring Maud to her senses. By the way, did I tell you that I've ordered some Dutch architects from Berlin to go?"

"The Dutch are from Holland," she said wearily.

"To go over to Groostock and give me a complete estimate on repairing and remodeling the royal castle? I dare say we'll have to do a good deal



"There will be something doing in Europe the day I land there, Lou."

to the place. It's several hundred years old and must require a lot of conveniences, such as bathrooms, electric lights and steam heating. Probably needs refurnishing from top to bottom, too, and a new roof. I never saw a ruin yet that didn't leak. Remember those castles on the Rhine? Will you ever forget how wet we got the day we went through the one at—"

"They were abandoned, tumbledown castles," she reminded him. "There isn't a castle in Europe that's any good in a rainstorm," he proclaimed.

"It is time you informed yourself about the country you are trying to annex to the Blithers estate," she said sarcastically. "I can assist you to some extent if you will be good enough to listen. In the first place, the royal castle at Edelweiss is one of the most substantial in the world. It has not been allowed to fall into decay. In fact, it is inhabited from top to bottom by members of the royal household and the court. As for the furnishings, I can assure you that the entire Blithers fortune could not replace them if they were to be destroyed by fire or pillage. They are priceless, and they are unique. I have read that the hangings in the bedchamber of the late Princess Yvette are the most wonderful in the whole world. The throne chair in the great audience chamber is of solid gold and weighs nearly 2,000 pounds. It is studded with diamonds, rubies, emeralds—"

"Great Scott, Lou, where did you learn all this?" he gasped, his eyes bulging.

"—and many other precious stones. There is one huge carpet in the royal drawing room that the czar of Russia is said to have offered £100,000 for and the offer was scorned. The park surrounding the castle is said to be beautiful beyond the power of description. The—"

"I asked you where you got all this information. Can't you answer me?"

"I obtained all this and a great deal more from a lady who spent a year or two inside the castle walls. I refer to Mrs. Truxton King, who might have told you as much if you had possessed the wit to listen to her."

"See what?" exclaimed Mr. Blithers,

going back to his buoyant boyhood days for an adequate expression. "What a wonder you are, Lou! Say, but won't it make a wonderful home for you and me to spend a peaceful old age in when we get ready to lay aside the—"

He stopped short, for she had arisen and was standing over him with a quivering forefinger leveled at his nose.

"You may walk in where angels fear to tread, but you will walk alone, Will Blithers. I shall not be with you, and you may as well understand it now. I've told you a hundred times that money isn't everything, and it is as cheap as dirt when you put it alongside of tradition, honor, pride and loyalty. Those Graustarkians would take you by the nape of the neck and march you out of their castle so quick that your head would swim. You may be able to buy their prince for Maudie to exhibit around the country, but you can't buy the intelligence of the people. The people of Graustark must have an opportunity to see and become acquainted with Maud before the marriage is definitely arranged."

I will not have my daughter cast into a den of lions, Will—for that is what it may amount to. The people will adore her, they will welcome her with open arms if they are given the chance. But they will have none of her if she is forced upon them in the way you propose."

"I'll—I'll think it over," said Mr. Blithers, "but there's nothing on earth that can alter my determination to make Maud the Princess of Groostock. That's settled."

"Graustark, Will."

"Well, whatever it is," said he, and departed.

He thought hard until half-past 1, and then went to the wireless office, where he wrote out a message in cipher and directed the operator to waste no time in relaying it to his offices in Paris. It would be the height of folly to offer Scoville money, and it would be even worse to inspire the temporary imprisonment of the youth.

But there was a splendid alternative. He could manage to have his own daughter abducted—chaperon included—and held for ransom!

The more he thought of it the better it seemed to him, and so he sent a cipher message that was destined to throw his Paris managers into a state of agitation that cannot possibly be measured by words. In brief, he instructed them to engage a few respectable gentlemen—he was particularly exacting on the score of gentility—with orders to abduct the young lady and hold her in restraint until he arrived and arranged for her liberation. They were to do the deed without making any fuss about it, but at the same time they were to do it effectually.

He had the foresight to suggest that the job should be undertaken by the very detective agency he had employed to shadow young Scoville and also to keep an eye on Maud.

Late that evening he had a reply from his Paris managers. They inquired if he was responsible for the message they had received. It was a ticklish job, and they wanted to be sure the message was genuine. He wired back that he was the sender and to go ahead. The next morning they notified him that his instructions would be carried out as expeditiously as possible.

About 11 o'clock the next day an incomprehensibly long message began to rattle out of the air. He contained himself in patience, for the matter of half an hour or so longer, and then, as the clatter continued without cessation, he got up and made his way to the door of the operator's office.

"What is it? The history of England?" he demanded sarcastically. "Message for you, Mr. Blithers. It's a long one, and I had a hard time picking it up."

There were four sheets of writing at some outlandish price per word, but what cared he? His eyes almost started from his head as he took in the name at the bottom of the message. It was "Maud."

He took the precaution to read it before handing it over to his wife, to whom it was addressed in conjunction with himself. It was from Paris and ran thus:

Dear Father and Mother—in reply to your esteemed favor of the 19th, of possibly the 20th, I beg to inform you that I arrived safely in Paris as per schedule. Regarding the voyage, it was delightful. We had one or two rough days. The rest of the time it was perfectly heavenly. I met two or three interesting and amusing people the time and the time passed most agreeably. I think I wired you that I had a glimpse of a certain person. On my arrival in Paris I was met at the station by friends and taken at once to the small, exclusive hotel where they are stopping for the summer. It is so small and exclusive that I'm sure you have never heard of it. I may as well tell you that I have seen Charlie—our know who I mean—Chandler Scoville, and he has been very nice to me. Concerning your suggestion that I reconsider the statement issued to the press, I beg to state that I do not see any sense in taking the world into my confidence any farther than it has been taken already, if that is grammatically correct. I have also sent word to a certain person that he is not to pay any attention to the report that we are likely to change our minds in order to help out the greedy newspapers who don't appear to know when they have had enough. I hope that the voyage will benefit both of you as much as it did me. If I felt any better than I do now I'd call for the police as a precaution. Let me suggest that you try the chicken a la bombardier in the Rita restaurant. I found it delicious. I dare say they serve it as nicely on your ship as they do on the Jupiter, as the manageress is the same. Of course one never can tell about chefs. My plans are a trifle indefinite. I may leave here at any moment. If I should happen to be away from Paris when you arrive don't worry about me. I shall be all right and in safe hands. I will let you know where I am just as soon as I get settled somewhere. I must go where it is quiet and peaceful. I am so distressed over what has occurred that I don't feel as though I

could ever be seen in public again without a thick veil and a pair of goggles. I have plenty of money for immediate use, but you might deposit something to my credit at the Credit Lyonnais, as I haven't the least idea how long I shall stay over here. Miranda is well and is taking good care of me. She seldom lets me out of her sight if that is any comfort to you. I hope you will forgive the brevity of this communication and believe me when I say that it is not lack of love for you both that curtails its length, but the abominably hot weather. With endless love from your devoted daughter, MAUD.

It was nearly bedtime before word came from his managers in Paris. Bedtime had no meaning for him after he had worked out the message by the code. It is true that he observed a life long custom and went to bed, but he did not do it for the purpose of going to sleep.

"Your daughter has disappeared from Paris. All efforts to locate her have failed. Friends say she left ostensibly for the Pyrenees, but inquiries at stations and along line fail to reveal trace of her. Scoville still here and apparently in the dark. He is being watched. Her companion and maid left with her last night. Prince of Graustark and party left for Edelweiss today."

So read the message from Paris.

CHAPTER XVI. A Word of Encouragement.

ONE usually has breakfast on the porch of the Hotel Schweizerhof at Interlaken. It is not the most fashionable hostelry in the quaint little town at the head of the lake of Thun, but it is of an excellent character, and the rolls and honey to be had with one's breakfast cannot be surpassed in the Bernese Oberland.

R. Schmidt sat facing the dejected Boske Dank. His eyes were dancing with the joy of living.

"Well, here we are, and in spite of that, where are we?" said Dank, who saw nothing beautiful in the smile of any early morn. "I mean to say, what have we to show for our pains? We sneak into this God forsaken hamlet, surrounded on all sides by abominations in the shape of tourists, and at the end of twenty-four hours we discover that the fair Miss Guile has played us a shabby trick. I daresay she is laughing herself sick over the whole business."

"Which is more than you can say for yourself, Boske," said Robin blithely. "Brace up! All is not lost. We'll wait here a day or two longer and then—"

"Hello, who is this approaching? It is no other than the great Gourou himself, the king of sleuths, as they say in the books I used to read. Good morning, baron."

The sharp visaged little minister of police came up to the table and fixed an accusing eye upon his sovereign—the literal truth, for he had the other eye closed in a protracted wink.

"I regret to inform your majesty that the enemy is upon us," he said. "I fear that our retreat is cut off. Nothing remains save—"

"Where is she?" demanded Robin, unimpressed by this glowing panegyric. "At this instant, sir, I fancy she is rallying her forces in the very face of a helpless mirror. In other words, she is preparing for the fray. She is dressing."

"When did she arrive?"

"She came last night via Milan." "From Milan?" cried Robin, astonished.

"A roundabout way, I'll admit," said the baron, dryly, "and tortuous in these hot days, but admirably suited to a purpose. I should say that she was bent on throwing some one off the track."

"And yet she came!" cried the prince, in exultation. "She wanted to come, after all, now didn't she, Dank?" He gave the lieutenant a look of triumph.

"She is more dangerous than I thought," said the guardsman mournfully.

"Sit down, baron," commanded the prince. "I want to lay down the law to all of you. You three will have to move on to Graustark and leave me to look out for myself. I will not have Miss Guile!"

"No!" exclaimed the baron, with unusual vehemence. "I expected you to propose something of the kind, and I am obliged to confess to you that we have discussed the contingency in advance. We will not leave you. That is final. You may depose us, ex-

ile us, curse us or anything you like, but still we shall remain true to the duty we owe to our country. We stay here, Prince Robin, just so long as you are content to remain."

Robin's face was very red. "You shame me, baron," he said simply.

"Now, I have a suggestion of my own to offer," said the baron, taking a seat at the end of the table. "I confess that Miss Guile may not be favorably impressed by the constant attendance of three abled-bodied nurses, and, as she happens to be no fool, it is reasonably certain that she will grasp the significance of our assiduity. Now I propose that the count, Dank and myself efface ourselves as completely as possible during the rest of our enforced stay in Interlaken. I propose that we take quarters in another hotel and leave you and Hobbs to the tender mercies of the enemy. It seems to me that—"

"Good!" cried Robin. "That's the ticket! I quite agree to that, baron."

Ten o'clock found the three gentlemen—so classified by Hobbs—out of the Schweizerhof and arranging for accommodations at the Regina Hotel Jungfraublick.

He was somewhat puzzled by the strange subservience of his companions. Deep down in his mind lurked the disquieting suspicion that they were conniving to get the better of the lovely temptress by some ally and secret bit of strategy. What had be-

come of their anxiety, their eagerness to drag him off to Graustark by the first train?

Enlightenment came unexpectedly and with a shock to his composure. Two people emerged from the door and, passing by without so much as a glance in his direction, made their way to the mounting block. Robin's heart went down to his boots. Bedelia, a graceful figure in a smart riding habit, was laughing blithely over a soft spoken remark that her companion had made as they were crossing the porch. And that companion was no other than the tall, good looking fellow who had met her at Cherbourg! The prince, stunned and incredulous, watched them mount their horses and canter away, followed by a groom who seemed to have sprung up from nowhere.

"Good morning, Mr. Schmidt," spoke a voice, and still bewildered, he whirled, hat in hand, to confront Mrs. Gaston. "Did I startle you?"

He bowed stiffly over the hand she held out for him to clasp and murmured something about being proof against any surprise.

"Isn't it a glorious morning? And how wonderful she is in this gorgeous sunlight," went on Mrs. Gaston, in what may be described as a hurried, nervous manner.

"I had the briefest glimpse of her," mumbled Robin. "When did she come?"

"Centuries and centuries ago, Mr. Schmidt," said she, with a smile. "I was speaking of the Jungfrau." "Oh!" he exclaimed, flushing. "I thought you—er—yes, of course! Really quite wonderful."

"Your mind has gone horseback riding, I fear. At present it is between here and Lauterbrunnen, jogging beside that roaring little torrent that—" "I don't mind confessing that you are quite right," he said frankly. "You are in love."

"I am," he confessed.

She laid her hand upon his. Her eyes were wide with eagerness. "Would it drive away the blues if I were to tell you that you have a chance to win her?"

He felt his head spinning. "If—I could believe that—that!" he began and choked up with the rush of emotion that swept through him.

"She is a strange girl. She will marry for love alone. Her father is determined that she shall marry a royal prince. That much I may confess to you. She has defied her father, Mr. Schmidt. She will marry for love, and I believe it is in your power to awaken love in that adorable heart of hers. You!"

"For God's sake, Mrs. Gaston, tell me—tell me, has she breathed a word to you that—"

"Not a single word. But I know her well. I have known her since she was a baby, and I can read the soul that looks out through those lovely eyes."

"But you—you don't know anything about me. I may be the veriest adventurer. I must be honest with you, Mrs. Gaston," he said suddenly. "I am not!"

"You are a good deal more than that," she said. "I have known her since she was a baby, and I can read the soul that looks out through those lovely eyes."

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